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Riesling's revival

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Finally, the Riesling renaissance has arrived - and is it any surprise that the greatest consumer market in the world, the United States, is driving demand?



I never, ever thought it would happen but now at last it has. Riesling has really and truly become popular on a worldwide basis. In fact nowadays most people even know how to spell and pronounce it. ("Reece-ling")

People have been known to say to me, foolishly, "It must be a daunting responsibility to have so much power, being an international commentator on wine and all that." I have always used Riesling as my example of choice to demonstrate how pathetically little influence I wield. I have been going on ad nauseam about the wonders of Riesling for decades, insisting it is the world's greatest white wine grape, and for decades Riesling in general and German wine in particular remained bottom of the heap in terms of popularity. But now at last, after not a few false starts, Germany's number one grape variety is truly enjoying the spotlight of fashion.

Riesling may not sell in the same sort of quantity as the ubiquitous Chardonnay, and it will never be as widely grown, but it is more popular than I have ever known in my 32 years writing about wine.

Throughout the final quarter of the 20th century, Riesling was largely regarded with contempt. The problem was mainly that newcomers to wine were weaned on sugar water labelled things like Liebfraumilch and Piesporter Michelsberg that tasted of nothing but came in the same tapered bottles as Riesling. Riesling's image seemed to have been irreparably damaged - simply by association.

Since then two wonderful things have happened. Firstly Germany's exports of the most blatantly commercial blends have dwindled and today's generation of newcomers to wine are much more likely to have cut their wine drinking teeth on sweetened-up Chardonnay. This means that they approach their first Riesling without preconceptions and, often, see it as a refreshing improvement on basic Chardonnay.

Secondly, thanks partly to climate change and partly to the efforts of an admirably ambitious new generation in Germany, the quality of German wine in general and therefore of German Riesling has increased enormously. It is now possible to ripen Riesling grapes fully and so regularly in Germany that dry (trocken) Rieslings no longer taste like paint stripper but can be great, "serious" wines of the highest rank. That German Riesling no longer has to be sweet(ened up to disguise underripeness) has contributed enormously to its international stature.

Riesling has also seemed just the thing to wine drinkers tired of what they see as the heaviness or oakiness of Chardonnay. And the popularity of Pinot Gris and Pinot Grigio has done no harm to Riesling either. One aromatic grape deserves another. Many wine drinkers also seem to treasure the clean crispness of Riesling, and its natural unadorned fruit.

The country in which the Riesling renaissance is perhaps most obvious is the United States. In an extremely ordinary café in La Guardia airport in New York recently I was amazed to be given the opportunity to choose between two different German Rieslings by the glass. Upstate in the Finger Lakes, source of arguably America's finest dry Rieslings for the last 20 years at least, producers are pinching themselves that at last they're fashionable. Riesling grape prices have recently overtaken those of once-lauded Chardonnay, mirroring what is happening over the border in Canada.

In California well over a quarter of all Riesling vines in last year's official grape census were too young to bear fruit. But these figures are notorious under-estimates. The value of American imports of German wine rose 27% in 2006. There is no doubt that the state's total hectareage of Riesling (sometimes called White Riesling) just keeps on rising. Although producers such as Château St Jean gained a reputation for Late Harvest Riesling, then called Johannisberg Riesling, in the 1980s, it has been years since anyone other than the likes of Navarro in Mendocino has taken more than a cursory interest in the variety - until very recently.

Eroica Riesling, a joint venture between Erni Loosen of Bernkastel in the Mosel and the dominant wine company in Washington state, Château Ste Michelle, introduced a host of American wine drinkers to the delights of Riesling. Now Château M, a sister brand based not on Washington-grown Riesling but on Riesling imported in bulk from Germany, is another runaway success.

So successful is Riesling in the portfolio of Constellation, the world's biggest wine company, that they too are having to import it in bulk from Germany for their California-bottled Woodbridge label - and are complaining heartily about rising prices.

The German wine authorities have been able to boast recently that they simply cannot keep up with global demand. The top growers of the Mosel even felt confident enough recently to put on a tasting of their finest Rieslings in Paris.

Riesling doesn't have to have German connections by any means. Quite apart from the stunning dry Rieslings so admired in Alsace in eastern France, top quality Riesling has played a major part in the export success of fine white wines from both Austria and Australia. Australia has long been known as the world's most important source of Riesling after Germany but great Australian Riesling no longer has to come from either Clare Valley or Eden Valley. The world's increasing band of Riesling lovers can now choose from particularly fine Rieslings made in places such as Tasmania, Great Southern and Henty.

New Zealand winemakers are showing a new confidence in their growing output of Riesling which, alongside Pinot Gris, is becoming increasingly popular as it is made with decreasing amounts of residual sugar. Even Chile's winemakers are keen to show they too can participate in the great Riesling revival with some increasingly complex wine made from vines planted relatively recently in the far southern Bio Bio region.

In South Africa, there is now a Just Riesling Association, formed to encourage plantings of Riesling and to discourage the use of the word Riesling for any variety other than true German Riesling - a sign that the latter is at last venerated enough to try to stop the sloppy and misleading use of such names as Cape Riesling and Paarl Riesling for the very ordinary Cruchen Blanc grape. Wines such as Frostline Riesling show that parts of the Cape winelands are quite cool enough for this demandingly precise and relatively precocious grape variety.

All over the world wine drinkers are discovering just how brilliantly Riesling goes with food, adding vibrancy to flavours rather than swamping them with oak or alcohol. The more patient ones are enjoying Riesling's capacity to age so intriguingly while the more intellectual ones are marvelling at its ability to express geography as eloquently as the most fastidious Pinot Noir. But then I have known this all along.